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Conference Reports

2017 Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya

Kathmandu, Nepal

26–28 July 2017

The 6th Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya was held at the Hotel Shanker in Kathmandu, Nepal on 26–28 July 2017. Sponsored by the Social Science Baha, Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Britain-Nepal Academic Council, Centre for Himalayan Studies-CNRS, and Nepal Academic Network (Japan), this conference brought together some 150 participants and presenters from all over the world, at least half of whom were from Nepal. Two concurrent panels were held during three sessions on each of the three days of the conference (thus eighteen panels in all), with papers mainly representing fields within the social sciences: Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Gender Studies, and Development Studies; a few Humanities-oriented papers were also presented in History, Art History, and Religious Studies; and several Nepal-based NGOs were also represented.

Following opening comments by Heather Hindman (President, ANHS; University of Texas, Austin) and David Gellner (Chairman, Britain-Nepal Academic Council; University of Oxford), the conference opened with a panel on intermarriage in

Nepal that explored issues around a broad definition of intermarriage as “marriage occurring between two individuals who belong to or descend from distinct and separate castes, ethnic groups, faiths, or linguistic communities.” The focus of these three papers, two of which were based in Kathmandu, was largely on the role of inter-caste marriages in contemporary Nepal, as traditional caste-based systems interact with global capitalism, Maoist-based political systems, and untouchability.

The panel ‘Conservation and Locals’ represented well the diverse academic and professional backgrounds seen in many of the conference’s other panels. Bringing together presenters from both academia and NGOs, this panel addressed the various ways that Himalayan communities have encountered, shaped, and managed local facets of the natural environment. Pooja Thapa’s (Institute for Social and Economic Change) paper addressed how two important religious bodies in Sikkim, the Kagyu Buddhist Sangha and the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department, engage with the state and INGOs over issues such as climate change, tree planting, waste management systems, and vegetarianism. Nayna Jhaveri’s (Independent researcher) paper examined the diverse management of forests across the twelve districts of Nepal’s Terai, analyzing the interplay between government-managed, community-managed,

and privately-managed regimes. Finally, drawing on the insights of environmental history, Thomas Robertson (Director, Fulbright Commission) examined how the effects of the strict separation of humans and nature instituted in Chitwan National Park in 1973 served both local communities and the region’s wildlife populations.

Among the several panels that handled the theme of education in Nepal, ‘New and Old: Challenges in the Education Sector in Nepal’ addressed changing patterns in Nepal’s multiple educational systems. Lokranjan Parajuli (Martin Chautari) looked back to the early 1970s when King Mahendra and Crown Prince Birendra developed the National Education System Plan; despite its good intentions, Parajuli concluded that this system “was merely a pretext to extend the regime’s grip over public life by taking full control of the educational arena and ... to make [citizens] loyal to the system and monarchy by intervening through the textbooks and examinations.” Rajendra Rai Timilsina (Kathmandu University) observed the recent re-emergence in Nepal of the Vedic-oriented Gurukul educational system and its even more recent admission of girls and Dalits, despite their traditional exclusion from hearing and chanting the Vedas. Finally, Shristi Sijapati (University of Manchester) addressed the role of I/NGOs, rather than the federal government, in providing

quality education to marginalized girls in Nepal, as they strategize solutions for such issues as poverty reduction, employment generation, the establishment of all-girls schools, and expansion of more local support programs.

A final panel of note was ‘Nepali Imaginings,’ which accounted for three different popular depictions of “Nepal.” Agastaya Thapa’s (Jawaharlal Nehru University) fantastic paper analyzed the transformation of traditional scroll art local to the Darjeeling hills for the tourist market. More than just part of the tourism industry, however, Thapa argued that these popular images “perpetuate and consolidate a visual lingua franca by which a viable cultural and political identity” that is itself influenced by a variety of visual and political factors, including nineteenth century colonial photographs and the contemporary Gorkhaland Movement, which asserts political recognition and identity for the ethnically Nepalese population in India. Bal Bahadur Thapa’s (Tribhuvan University) paper examined the role of six works of Nepali film and literature in developing a trajectory of Nepali modernity from Prithivi Narayan Shah’s *Dibyopadesh* in the late eighteenth century leading up to the end of Nepal’s monarchy in 2008. Finally, Kalyan Bhandari (University of the West of Scotland) presented on the various and problematic ways that Mt. Everest is presented as “an international icon and a heritage of ‘universal’ value,” especially with the search, by some, of a central national symbol following the recent end of the Nepali monarchy.

Alexander von Rospatt (University of California, Berkeley) offered the keynote lecture at the end of the conference’s first day, on the topic of the wall painting of the *Svayambhu*

Purana inside the tantric shrine of Santipur at Kathmandu’s *Svayambhu stupa*. A technical difficulty prevented the scheduled showing of the film *Mi-Tse: Struggles of a Dolpo Woman* after the second day.

The 2017 Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya offered an interesting and insightful variety of panels for the many attending students and scholars of the Himalaya. Though focused primarily on social science approaches to topics within Nepal, the topics of the conference’s eighteen panels were sufficiently diverse to encourage meaningful discussion across borders of all kinds.

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